

## “The Peace of Jerusalem”

Psalm 122

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### The Peace(?) of God

Many of you know that I grew up in the Lutheran church. What you might not know is that I wasn't always the most attentive child in church. One of my favorite things to do was flip through the hymnal. In that hymnal – much like in ours – there were some songs that we sang all the time, and some that I had never heard. One that we sang regularly was “Amazing Grace.” But I'll never forget my confusion when I turned the page to the next song, “They Cast Their Nets.” No hymnal is put together as though it's going to be read cover to cover, or as though one song should follow immediately after the next. But try to imagine my shock as I found these words right next to the beautiful, comforting lines of “Amazing Grace”:

*They cast their nets in Galilee, just off the hills of brown;  
Such happy, simple fisher-folk before the Lord came down.  
Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew  
The peace of God that filled their hearts brimful and broke them too.  
Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless in Patmos died;  
Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head-down was crucified.  
The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod;  
Yet let us pray for but one thing: the marvelous peace of God.<sup>1</sup>*

That hymnwriter was obviously more than a little skeptical about the peace of God. We've titled this sermon “The Peace of Jerusalem.” You should probably be just as skeptical about that concept. If I were to ask you what words you associate with Jerusalem or the Middle East, I don't think many of you would say “peace.” It probably wouldn't even crack your top ten. Anyone who has kept up with the news or studied history knows that the whole region of the Middle East has been the site of almost constant political and religious conflicts for centuries. Every generation produces visionaries and leaders who are passionate about figuring out how to have lasting peace in the Middle East. Nobody has ever been successful.

There's something absolutely beautiful and frustrating and complicated about the way God designed us. We are a people who have an innate drive for peace, but we seek peace in a world where it has over and over again proved elusive. Instead of peace, our world has been filled with chaos, violence, death and destruction. And yet we are still a people of hope. We are a people who celebrate Advent, anticipating the joy to come. This Psalm, much like the season of Advent which we will be entering in just a few short weeks, is all about the journey out of chaos and injustice and destruction into a place of security and justice and peace.

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Percy, “They Cast Their Nets,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 2000).

## Rejoicing Over Jerusalem

*I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem. (Psalm 122:1-2)*

Psalm 122 is the third of fifteen "Psalms of Ascent." The Psalms of Ascent are songs that were probably sung by the Jews as they went up to Jerusalem for the annual religious festivals. Many pilgrims would travel up to Jerusalem from their homes on long journeys that could take days of hard travel each way. These Psalms of Ascent were their pilgrimage songs; a playlist for a long road trip. Among them, Psalm 122 is unique because it is a song of arrival.<sup>2</sup> This is the only Psalm of Ascent to tell us specifically where the singers are. Their feet are in the gates; they've made it to Jerusalem. If you've ever made a long trip, you probably know a little bit about what these pilgrims are feeling.

I thought I had done a lot of traveling and knew the joy of arriving at my destination. Then, a little over a year ago, I took a long road trip with some small children. For almost 11 hours, I drove while my infinitely patient fiancé kept me supplied with coffee and negotiated snacks and potty breaks and entertainment with our then-6-year-old twins. Though I've made that drive many times over the 15 years that I've been in Hickory, I've never been so excited for the arrival as I was on that trip. It has never taken so long. I have never made so many stops. When we made it to the end, I was rejoicing to be able to finally say, "Zero! It's ZERO more minutes until we get here!" But the psalmist has something so much more important than travel fatigue and an aching back and kindergarten-question exhaustion in mind. The pilgrims of Psalm 122 aren't rejoicing because the journey is over; they're rejoicing because their destination is so magnificent and worthy of praise. Let's take a closer look at what made arriving in Jerusalem so important that somebody felt compelled to write a song about it, and a whole society preserved that song for generations.

When I used to teach high school religion classes, I would tell my students that Jerusalem is a spectacularly unlikely place. Its importance and influence in the world throughout history is wildly disproportionate to its size. Today, the population is estimated to be around 920,000, which is about the population of Charlotte and Hickory combined. It's a lot of people, but it's not *that* many people that we should expect this city to be the focal point of so much history and religion and politics. The reasons that Jerusalem became so much more influential than its size would suggest are interesting and complex, but far more than we have time to talk about today.

What we do need to say today is that in the ancient world for the Jewish people, Jerusalem represents the physical presence of God. When these pilgrims arrive in Jerusalem, they are doing so much more than returning to a meaningful city or a favorite vacation spot; they are arriving at the very place that God's presence dwells. This might be a difficult concept for us to really wrap our minds around on this side of the cross and on this side of Pentecost. We teach our children from a young age that God is in our hearts and is with us wherever we go. In some ways, we probably take it for granted that we are not ever separated from the presence of God. The Apostle Paul talked about it famously in Romans 8 – "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate

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<sup>2</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2011), 392.

us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This belief that God is with us always and everywhere is central to who we are as Christians. That wasn’t so for the Jews.

For the Jews, the presence of God had always been with them. But God’s presence was with them in a collective way, not an individual way. God’s presence went before them as a pillar of fire. God’s presence dwelled among them in the Tabernacle. God’s presence resided in the Holy of Holies. In other words, God’s presence was connected to a place. At this time in their history, Jerusalem happens to be the place where they can encounter the presence of God. You may have places in your life where you feel closer to God – maybe in a church or at the ocean or at the symphony. But that’s just a matter of feelings. Imagine if that place was the only place you could be near God. Wouldn’t you do some rejoicing every time you got there? That’s what Jerusalem represents to the Jewish pilgrims, and that’s why they end up writing this psalm. Their excitement is about the presence of God, not the place; but that presence is attached to a place.

### **Security, Praise, Justice**

*Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up—the tribes of the Lord—to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David. (Psalm 122:3-5)*

The psalmist lifts up three attributes of Jerusalem: it is “closely compacted,” it is “where the tribes go... to praise the name of the Lord,” and it is where “the thrones for judgement” stand. The first phrase, “a city that is closely compacted together” probably doesn’t sound all that positive. When I first read that phrase, I pictured some of the dense, inner-city housing projects that I’ve seen in major cities around the world. For a wide-open-spaces-loving introvert like me, that looks like an awful mess of people stacked on top of each other without much green space or clean air or privacy. If that’s where I was headed, I would not be rejoicing over my arrival. That would feel like getting excited to go stand in an airport security line or be in a mosh pit.

But that’s probably not what the psalmist had in mind. “The word translated ‘bound’/‘compacted’... is never used elsewhere of buildings. Rather, it is used of human compacts or alliances. Thus... it is not so much Jerusalem’s architecture that is being praised, but Jerusalem’s ability to bring people together.”<sup>3</sup> We have the same distinctions in English. If I tell you that I’m “close” with someone, it’s not a statement about our geographical location. I’m not saying we are in close physical proximity (i.e. squeezed into a tight space); I’m telling you that we share a strong, close bond of friendship and a sense of camaraderie. The people of Jerusalem are close – they are united in a strong alliance with one another as God’s people – and being in that environment was the first cause for rejoicing.

The second phrase, “where the tribes go up... to praise the name of the Lord,” is the most clear and direct of the three. We already know that these psalms are designed for pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem for a festival. Worshiping God is at the heart of the Jewish faith, these pilgrim festivals are the biggest celebrations of the year, and that worship and celebration

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<sup>3</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *NIB* 4:1184. See also Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 901.

finds its fullest expression in Jerusalem. The people of God have always been about the business of worshiping God. Being in the place where God is worshiped was the second reason for rejoicing.

The third phrase, “there stand the thrones for judgement” is another phrase that probably takes some explanation. David’s “house,” his dynasty, the monarchy that is centered in Jerusalem was designed to be the “dispenser of justice to the people.”<sup>4</sup> We need to be careful not to think too narrowly about justice. Sometimes, we hear a phrase like “dispenser of justice” and we conjure up images of vengeance and retribution. That’s not the kind of justice that Jerusalem or the Davidic rulers were called to provide. The justice in view here is much more about equality. The monarchy’s job is primarily “to assure that the weak, needy, and vulnerable have a reliable advocate and resources for sustenance in the world.”<sup>5</sup> That kind of justice is a necessary precursor for peace. Maybe that’s a new idea to you, but I know you’ve seen this to be true.

When there is an absence of justice, or justice is misused or abused, there is no peace. In our modern world, we have seen this clearly with the accusations made against various police departments over the past few years for misuse of force. Whatever your position, whether you tend to side with the police or with those who criticize them, it’s impossible to deny that even the *perception* or *suspicion* of the miscarriage of justice destroys the possibility for peace. Justice, especially justice that is carried out in accord with God’s designs, results in peace.<sup>6</sup> We’re talking about divine justice, where God sees all, knows all, and judges wisely and fairly. It’s the hope of that kind of justice, coupled with entering the presence of the Great Judge, that makes the pilgrims rejoice.

### **For Their Sake**

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.” For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, “Peace be within you.” For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity. (Psalm 122:6-9)*

Everybody wants peace; it’s nothing new to our generation or unique to Christians. The very name Jerusalem has the Hebrew word “shalom” (peace) inside it. What we miss in English (though it is very obvious in Hebrew) is that verse 6 has tremendous alliteration. In English it reads, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.’” In Hebrew, the words for “pray” and “secure”/“security” have the same first two consonants of the Hebrew word “peace.” Remember that the Hebrew word for “peace” is also in the word Jerusalem. The Hebrew reader – or perhaps more accurately, the Hebrew singer – would be tripping all over himself with these linguistic echoes of peace. For the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem singing this psalm, their hearts and minds and tongues are ringing with the sounds of peace.

All of that sounds really lovely and poetic, doesn’t it? In theory and on paper, it’s beautiful. But what about real life? Real life makes this all a bit more tricky. Here in the real

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<sup>4</sup> DeClaissé-Walford et. al., *The Book of Psalms*, 901.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms*, NCBC (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 529.

<sup>6</sup> McCann, *NIB* 4:1184.

world, we know that Jerusalem is not a peaceful place. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Jerusalem has for centuries been in the midst of one of the most conflict-laden areas of the world. The ancient Jewish people who wrote this song, the ones who sang it on their way to the festivals, and even many modern Jews live in anything but security. So what can this psalm possibly mean in light of that reality? Our task as modern believers is to examine scriptures like this, take them seriously, reflect on them deeply and ask how God might shape us and our world through them.

### **Peace for Today**

I think what we do with this passage comes in two stages. The first is sort of abstract. We need to ask ourselves if we really want peace. That's a harder question than it may seem. It requires us to approach this text and to approach God with a great deal of humility.

"The peace the pilgrims wish for Jerusalem is calm undisturbed by social conflict within and dread of enemies without."<sup>7</sup> Think about the circles you run in – where is there social conflict? Where are there outside forces trying to break in and disrupt things in an unhealthy way? Now – and this one is much harder – try to look at your life in a more detached way. Ask yourself, "Am I part of the problem?" Are there places where *you* are a source of conflict or dread for others? Are your actions leading toward or away from the security and peace of God's creation? I'd be willing to bet that at different times and in different circumstances, we are all both victims AND violators. We have had peace and security taken from us, and we have at times been the ones who destroy another person or group's peace and security. Being ready for peace means we are ready to face those transgressions honestly and fully. It means being ready to confess to God – and one another, if appropriate – the ways we have harmed others. It means being ready to repent from our wrongdoings. It means being open to God's transforming grace. Peace doesn't mean that everybody else stops bothering you and you finally get your way. Peace means that God transforms us all, so that we all live the way he imagines – not the way we imagine. Peace always comes at a price.

If you're not at the point where you're ready to say, "yes, I want peace," that's okay. We all have seasons where, if we're being honest, we'd much rather have our own way and feel like we're in control, rather than hand the reins over to God. I don't think that's the best long-term choice, but it's an option. If that's where you are today, just keep praying. Ask God to give you the faith to trust his plans. Ask for the grace to accept whatever God needs to do to change you to make you a person of peace. I think God loves prayers that ask him to help us be on board with his will.

But if you're thinking, "this peace and security sounds great – let's go for it!" this next section is for you. How do we get there? First, we can do exactly what the psalmist says to do; we can pray for peace. Many of you already know that we at Corinth make great efforts to distinguish between essentials and nonessentials, which often means not taking partisan political stances. To that end, hear me clearly – a psalm that tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is not necessarily an instruction to support the modern government of Israel. Perhaps you are pro-Israel, perhaps you are pro-Palestine. To get stuck on that issue misses the point of this psalm entirely. More than anything this psalm is about the presence of God, not

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<sup>7</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 393.

the places. It is an affirmation that God brings peace in the midst of chaos. Sometimes God does that through human governments or institutions, sometimes we see miracles that transcend understanding. In any case, God is the one responsible for peace.

We can start praying for peace by identifying places in our world where there's an absence of peace. If you start looking, you'll see there's no shortage of options! Pray for peace in broken people, pray for peace in struggling marriages, pray for peace in the midst of loss, pray for peace in the workplace, pray for peace in your neighborhood, pray for peace for war-torn nations. If you're ready to go deeper, you can seek for prosperity. Note that prosperity in this context has nothing to do with amassing wealth. Prosperity has to do with resting in the presence of God. Seeking the prosperity of God's creation is how we put feet to our prayers for peace. There are so many ways right here in Hickory that you can work for peace and bring about the "wholeness" that God desires for all of creation.

We've told you about our Gospel Justice initiative at Viewmont Elementary and Hickory High School. You can work for peace by helping children have better access to educational resources and support systems. On Friday night, we had an "Artist Nite" here at church with proceeds benefiting Forgiven Prison Ministry. You can donate or volunteer for one-day events with Forgiven to help bring peace to families who have been torn apart by criminal behavior and imprisonment. You can help build our Legacy Habitat house and provide peace that comes through stable and secure housing to one of our neighbors. One side of today's bulletin insert is about Foster Care in Catawba County. Even if you can't foster a child, you can help to support those who do. The list goes on and on and on.

Jerusalem is a tremendously unlikely place for peace, and humans are unlikely instruments for peace. But God so often uses unlikely places and sinful people and flawed institutions to make wonders happen. I think God does that so that we can never claim credit for what he has accomplished. Seeking God's peace will not be easy. In fact, I think the hymn-writer may have been right. The peace of God may involve mucking our way through "strife closed in the sod."<sup>8</sup> Most things we value do come at a price, and peace certainly can have a very high price. But when we seek what God seeks and work for what God works for, we are truly living out our calling as Christians. Our journey up to Jerusalem is one in which we choose to approach the house of the Lord, we choose to submit ourselves to the reign of God, we choose to praise God, we choose to work for God's just purposes in the world. We choose daily to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We choose to do the hard things because they matter. If we truly believe that God is good and God is in control, we can't help but submit to his will, and to seek peace and security and justice for all of God's creation. It's a huge undertaking, and we likely will not see the end of that task in our lifetime. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't start. Let's start now, church, as we "pray for but one thing, the marvelous peace of God."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Percy, "They Cast Their Nets."

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